Post-Graduation Experiences of Sub-Saharan African Graduates in the U.S.: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

African students who move to the United States as international students and live in the host country post-graduation present an important case study for policy makers and support networks to understand their lived experiences and their societal integration as working professionals. This article explores the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students, specifically South Africans, Kenyans, and Nigerians, who pursued their studies in the US and upon completion of their studies decided to remain at their place of destination. Mixed-methods research was used to interview the participants and through coding, related themes were developed regarding their time as migrants post-graduation. The findings demonstrated that 82.1 % of respondents had a positive experience. They believed that deciding to remain in the US after completing studies presented them with economic and personal growth opportunities. It was apparent that 53.1 % gained employment in line with their academic qualifications. Despite professional gains, social challenges existed with 19.6 % of participants reporting feelings of loneliness. This paper thus suggests comprehensive support services, such as psychosocial facilities to assist these African graduates navigate the transition from international students to residents.

Keywords: International migration, Student mobility, Globalization of education, African graduates, Study abroad

1   Background of the Study

In a world of expanding global corporate collaborations and transnational social networks, opportunities for internationally educated professionals have dramatically increased in the last thirty years. This reflects both the incentives for these professionals to migrate and their increasing demand for their specialised skills in the host countries. Globalisation of education has resulted in increased mobility of students in the quest to exploit new educational opportunities. International students' mobility is an important channel through which high-skilled immigrants arrive (Suter & Jandl, 2006), and it is particularly attractive in view of the high integration potential of high-skilled graduates (Chiswick & Miller, 2011; Kahanec & Králiková, 2012).

In this perspective, the rise of international student mobility is driven by an increased demand for technical, specialized, post-secondary education that prompts students to go abroad in search of educational opportunities that are better than those available to them in their home country (Shield, 2013:2). Several studies have examined the reasons why students decide to study abroad and how they choose their destination country, using frameworks like the push-pull factor theory (Lisana, 2023; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Pull factors such as education quality, and push factors such as limited job opportunities in both the host and home countries, influence the decision to study abroad. Yılmaz and Temizkan (2022) add that improved education, immigration opportunities, job prospects and cultural understanding are among the key reasons for studying abroad.

Different issues are responsible for the push and pull factors that induce people to move. Among push factors, Bernini et al. (2024) have noted impaired wellbeing occasioned by mismanagement of state resources. This has aggravated the poor condition of services, low wages or salary, misplacement of talent, human rights abuses, underemployment and poverty, which pushed most migrant postgraduate students out of their countries to secure employment abroad after completion of their studies (Benfifi, 2025; Reissová et

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al., 2024). Other push factors include political instability, lack of research facilities, inefficient institutions, disregard for local talent, discrimination in appointment and promotion, corruption, and limited access to quality education (Asiimwe & Musinguzi, 2024; Gomes, 2025). Economic or social factors that limit educational opportunity are particularly important push factors. In Africa, factors such as low level of economic development, political instability and religious or ethnic fractionalization, job opportunities in destination countries, selective immigration policies, wage gaps, geographical distance, former colonial links, and linguistic proximity between countries of origin and destination are the main factors driving highly skilled migration (Naval et al., 2024). These factors ultimately influence them to remain in their host country.

However, there is limited research on international students and their lived experiences post-graduation at their place of destination. Hence, the present research explores this topic and expands on the somewhat limited academic knowledge that currently exists on the actual experiences of foreign students, specifically South Africans, Kenyans and Nigerians in the US. It explores their lived experiences post-graduation broadly to add new insights through first-hand experiences of the sampled individuals, and to compare these with information gathered in the literature review. It is very crucial for policy makers and support networks to understand African graduates' experiences after they had decided to stay in the host country upon completion of their studies, as they present an important case study for policy makers and support networks to understand their lived experiences including societal integration and economic prospects.

Literature abounds on international student migration focused on well-known study destinations like USA, Canada, and UK. While international student migration is often viewed as a path for personal and professional growth, its broader implications remain a subject of debate. Some scholars see this type of migration as a post-colonial form of exploitation where rich countries disproportionately benefit from the skills and resources of economically disadvantaged countries by perpetuating global inequalities through brain drain. Conversely, other scholars characterise this kind of migration within the context of libertarianism or neoliberalism, emphasising that individuals are driven by personal choices and have the freedom to go wherever there are opportunities. These competing perspectives highlight the complexity of international migration, which has been characterised as a major propellant for global expansionism ranging from imperialism to neo-colonialism and neoliberalism (Pottie-Sherman, 2013; Thomas-Brown & Campos, 2016:115).

Massey (1988:383) indicates that some people leave their places of origin because their countries are poor, underdeveloped and consequently lacking in economic opportunity. They migrate to wealthy, developed nations to seek opportunities for employment at higher wages. Thus, growing social and economic inequalities between countries, and consequently unfulfilled life aspirations, trigger the migration intentions of millions, if not billions of people around the world (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Kainth (2009) notes that some of the most important and frequently mentioned pull factors are better economic prospects, higher salary and income, better career expectations, better research facilities, a modern educational system, better opportunity from higher qualification, prestige of foreign training, intellectual freedom, better working conditions and better employment opportunities, relative political stability, presence of a rich scientific and cultural tradition, availability of experienced and supporting staff, technological gaps, and allocation of substantial funds for research.

Further, "employers in receiving countries take a different position; they have their own shortages of skilled people in specific fields and can drain a developing country of expertise by providing job opportunities" (Dodani & LaPorte, 2005). Conversely, better wages and employment conditions, better information, recruitment, and cheaper transportation are encouraging skilled migrants to seek jobs in developed economies (Lowell & Findlay, 2001). For example, "in a survey conducted by Ghana's Ministry of Health to establish trends and reasons for the loss of their doctors between 1969 and 1999, the most common reasons obtained include the search for better remuneration and conditions of service, better postgraduate training opportunities, and the desire to afford basic life amenities" (Dovlo & Nyonator, 1999). Ombogo (2023) corroborated the above assertions when he noted that brain drain occurs when skilled labour from developing countries (LDCs) migrate to developed countries (DCs) in search of better living standards, professional growth, political stability, and security.

In a study about the dynamics of student mobility, the international student's decision to stay after

graduation can be a complex and dynamic process that depends on many different factors. Migration involves a significant life change with challenges such as communication difficulties, limited resources, restricted access to health care, shattered families and social networks, and other associated changes in status and responsibilities (Ryan, 2011; Tol et al., 2013; Yeh et al., 2008). This point is reinforced by the qualitative study of "the lived experiences of migration" conducted by Demireva and Quassoli (2019), explaining that "mobility is a complex and dynamic process starting with the decisions that are made before and along the journey and proceeding with examination of the challenges to migrants' early adaptation, work and social integration, and the changes in their feelings of belonging and citizenship status." While push and pull factors such as recruitment strategies by employers in receiving countries, economic prospects, and career opportunities may attract Sub-Saharan African students, these factors do not fully capture the complexities of their experiences after graduation as they transition to residing in their host countries.

In exploring the lived experiences of migrants in their host countries, existing literature emphasises that they are faced with complex challenges and opportunities that shape the lived experiences of these individuals. For instance, a study by Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) reveals that many immigrants experience a sense of isolation and homesickness, heightened by the pressures of adapting to a new culture and workforce. Also, Rathakrishnan et al. explain that "homesickness has some significant negative influence on students' academic performance, living quality, and psychological well-being." Moreover, the research studies have shown that most of the time, migration raises the vulnerability to mental health complications due to feelings of insecurity and non-availability of their own community members. This can lead to distress and would turn into mental health consequences or other forms of health complications (Virupaksha et al., 2014:238). Similarly, International Organisation of Migration (2004) postulate that although migration does not necessarily threaten mental health, it may create a specific psychosocial vulnerability and, as a result, mental health can be affected when these pressures are combined with other risk factors. For instance, in the post-migration phase, highly skilled migrants may experience mental ill health, especially if they do not feel valued; feel overqualified for the jobs they are doing; and if they experience a discrepancy between aspirations and achievement (Ventriglio et al., 2021). Although challenges encountered by migrants can lead to mental distress, these challenges are not universal. Rather, they depend on factors such as social support networks, integration policies, and personal resilience.

In "Immigrating to North America: The Kenyan immigrant's experience", Kabuiku (2017) notes that African immigrants experience acculturation stress when trying to integrate successfully into the community in the host country. African immigrant professionals come with high expectations for both their professional and personal lives. This stems from the workplace demands, some of which they might not be accustomed to, as well as external pressures such as familial commitments, insufficient material possessions, and uncertain social status (Kabuiku, 2017). Many immigrants, for instance, come with high expectations, ranging from social mobility, career advancement, high income and improved living standards, to professional recognition and respect, as well as a better work-life balance, and so forth. However, these expectations are often met with challenges such as job market saturation, underemployment, and cultural differences in workplace dynamics. The ability to effectively integrate into a new work community is determined by the activities that are pursued and the immigrant support systems to make the African immigrant feel at home (Kabuiku, 2017).

Studies have shown social support to be an important moderator of stress relief and coping with poor health outcomes, while insufficient social support is associated with reduced quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Kong et.al., 2021). Wong and Leung (2008) and Mosher et al. (2009) explain that social support is an important factor influencing the health of migrant workers. Good social support often plays a positive role in promoting or protecting their physical and mental health, and can also significantly alleviate migration related stress. Otherwise, the process of adjusting to a new work environment or culture without robust support networks can be overwhelming and increase acculturative stress.

Nonetheless, a study conducted by Kirmayer et al. (2011) shows that although migration poses specific stresses, most immigrants cope well with the transitions of resettlement. Furthermore, van Horne et al. (2018) revealed that migrants in the United States consistently reported low levels of social satisfaction

and feelings of being welcome. This suggests that the issue goes beyond individual and support mechanisms. According to García-Ramírez et al. (2011), immigrants usually face conditions of asymmetrical intergroup relations and experience oppression because of the unjust socio-cultural conditions of host societies. For instance, "world wide data suggest that immigrants experience poorer working conditions and occupational health than native workers" (Damia-Martinez et.al., 2023:1; Sterud et al., 2018). These issues can negatively impact on individuals' well-being and contribute to stress.

Moreover, Mpofu and Hocking (2013) write that in Europe, immigrants experience occupational apartheid even when they do find jobs aligned with their education, experience inequalities in access to healthcare services (Lebano et al., 2020), and report lower life satisfaction than locals (Arpino & de Valk, 2018). Lee (2006) identified many examples of racial discrimination in the United States that relied on students' self-reported experiences. The author noted that most of the students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East experienced at least some discrimination, whereas none of the students from Europe, Canada, or Australia experienced any discrimination. However, it is important to note that the study did not objectively measure discriminatory practices. Lee (2006) labelled this discriminatory experience as neo-racism, or "new racism" based on factors such as cultural influence, economic power or global status. Further, "some studies such as the one conducted have identified that in certain developed countries executives are allegedly more racist when recruiting staff than their counterparts in some other countries" (ILO, 2001). For example, in one European study, 28 % of (non-EU) foreigners between the ages of 25 and 49 were unable to find work, the rates being as high as 35 % for Turks and Pakistanis and 60 % for recent immigrant groups such as the Somalis. (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 1999). In a similar vein, these statistics show the nature of discrimination but also highlight key regional differences. Thus, the data reinforce the structural dimension that certain immigrant groups experience significantly higher unemployment rates, a phenomenon that may be attributed to systemic biases rather than individual prejudice. This aligns with the concept of neo-racism, which posits that discrimination is associated with cultural and economic hierarchies rather than solely with racial categories.

Concerning wage discrimination, studies indicate that migrant workers often receive lower wages than native workers for the same kind of work, even when differences in education levels are taken into account (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). In support of the above views, Amo-Agyei (2020) mentions the "Report on the migrant pay gap: Understanding wage differences between migrants and nationals", which analyses wage data of 49 countries from the latest year available prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Amo-Agyei (2020) writes that "it shows evidence on how dire the situation actually is with regard to pay — so vital to the daily life of workers and their families". The report finds that in the years before the pandemic, wage inequalities between migrant workers and nationals were very high in many countries and widening in some. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) reveals that "migrants earn nearly 13 % on average less than national workers in high-income countries". For example, "in some countries such as Cyprus, Italy, and Austria the pay gap in hourly wages is higher, at 42 % , 30 % and 25 % respectively." Another systematic review found that socio-economic difficulties such as low income, lack of social support, unemployment, and poor host language proficiency are associated with higher rates of depression (Akef et.al., 2024; Bogic et al., 2015). It should be noted that the studies primarily focused on low-skilled work where wage differences are evident. It is often challenging to analyse such inequalities among professionals due to lack of standard pay scales.

As immigrants navigate the challenges and opportunities after deciding to remain in their host country, they engage in a rational decision-making process based on a dynamic evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with their experiences. This assertion is supported by scholars in the social sciences asserting that "all action is fundamentally 'rational' in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do" (Scott, 2000). This approach is known as Rational Choice Theory. Rational Choice Theory (RCT) posits that these individuals go through a process in which they evaluate the potential costs and benefits related to each option. Rukema and Nkoko (2024:28) write that "the decision of immigrants to remain in the United States may be influenced by multiple determinants, including economic opportunities, career advancement, personal security, and opportunities that are not equally available in their countries of origin." For instance, when Sub-Saharan African immigrants move back to their countries,

this could lead to limited employment opportunities and low salary, whereas remaining in the United States would yield higher income and more employment opportunities (Rukema & Nkoko, 2024:28). Individuals move to another country with the expectation that it will improve their lives economically. Although non-financial reasons such as familial ties and lifestyle preferences play a significant role, RCT emphasises the monetary-related factors when analysing migration decisions. In the end, although immigrants face significant challenges in the host country, they remain in the US rather than returning to their home countries as they weigh their options and make decisions based on the long-term benefits and the relative advantages they perceive there.

2   Methodological Approach

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods, in which the data was collected over a period of three months in two consecutive phases. This design, according to Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011), consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. A survey was administered first, followed by semi-structured interview. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem. This is followed up by qualitative data collection to refine, extend, or explain the general picture (Subedi, 2016). Thus, in this study the researcher collected quantitative data and analysed it first which was the first phase. In the second phase, the qualitative data collection, participants were taken from the respondents in the quantitative part of the study.

2.1   Study Population

The target population consisted of individuals from Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, including both female and male graduates holding master's or doctoral degrees from U.S. institutions. These individuals had chosen to remain in the United States following the completion of their studies. Included were Africans who had resided in the host country for a duration of one year or more post-graduation. The targeted sample size was 100 from each country, a total of 300 for collection of quantitative data. The sample size was constrained to this target number by limited time and financial resources to collect data from a geographically dispersed population. However, only 224 respondents participated: 59 from South Africa, 79 from Kenya, and 86 from Nigeria. Qualitative data collection included 21 respondents: 7 from South Africa, 7 from Kenya, and 7 from Nigeria. These were sent the online questionnaire.

The study employed a snowball procedure accompanied by purposive sampling. The researcher identified four individuals who met the criteria and were willing to participate. These individuals knew others who met the same criteria and assisted the researcher in locating them. These participants also referred the researcher to additional individuals, and so forth. Johnson (2014) supports this approach, stating that snowball sampling is a well-known, nonprobability method of survey sample selection that is commonly used to locate hidden populations. The method relies on referrals from initially sampled respondents to other persons believed to have the characteristic of interest. Because it was challenging to locate the sufficient participants, purposive sampling was used to find potential participants through internet recruitment. These participants were selected based on the established criteria.

For this research, the researcher collected two major kinds of primary data: a survey, and an interview questionnaire administered through virtual networking platforms namely Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These were the same platforms used to recruit research participants. Secondary data was collected from government publications, websites, books, journal articles, and internal records (Ajayi, 2017). In the quantitative online survey, a coded questionnaire was distributed to participants who had been identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. Additionally, the researcher collected qualitative data through an online questionnaire with a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. Data was collected over a period of three months in two consecutive phases: quantitative data collection followed by qualitative data collection. To reduce the risk of biases, a pilot study was conducted before real data, both quantitative and qualitative, was collected. This was done to ensure that the questions asked were easy for the participants to understand and free of obvious biases and errors.

2.2   Analysis

In the first phase, quantitative data analysis was performed utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 26.0. The analysis encompassed both descriptive and inferential statistical methodologies. Descriptive statistics involved calculating frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, specifically the mean. For inferential statistics, a one-sample t-test was employed to assess the significance of Likert Scale responses relative to the neutral point (test value = 3). The results of the quantitative analysis were systematically presented in tabular format. In the second phase, the researcher analysed data using a qualitative method known as conceptual analysis. This is a form of content analysis in eight steps: (1) deciding on the level of process of analysis; (2) deciding how many concepts to code for; (3) deciding whether to code the existence of a concept; (4) deciding how to distinguish among concepts; (5) developing rules for the coding texts; (6) deciding what to do with the irrelevant information; (7) coding texts; and (8) analysing results. The researcher analysed the qualitative data manually because there were only 21 respondents. The questionnaires were printed out and the researcher followed all the above steps of conceptual content analysis. In a nutshell, narrative theme analyses were employed to find major themes and patterns in the questionnaire by looking for similarities and differences among them. The themes were derived from the study's objectives.

2.3   Ethical Consideration

Prior to the initiation of the research thesis, the researcher secured a certificate of ethical clearance from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) Ethics Committee, following an evaluation of the study materials and procedures for compliance with the institution's code of conduct. An informed consent form was provided to participants, allowing them to elect participation in the online survey and questionnaire, which was conducted on a voluntary basis. This form furnished potential participants with essential information, including the study's purpose, the estimated duration required to complete the questionnaire, and the contact information of both the supervisors and the researcher.

The principles of respondent confidentiality and anonymity were upheld. Confidentiality entails the implementation of safeguards to protect participants' privacy and their data from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, modification, loss and theft, while anonymity guarantees that the researcher and associated personnel will not have access to identifying information of participants at any time (Ryerson University, 2015). Consequently, participants were assured that the collected data would remain confidential and were informed of their right to discontinue participation at any point, for any reason. They were also made aware that they could withdraw their information by contacting the researcher. In instances where participants were identifiable, all identifying information was excluded from the final report. The researcher ensured that the data obtained through the online survey and questionnaire contained no identifying information. To mitigate potential threats to data privacy, appropriate measures were taken to protect this data. Following the collection and analysis, the data was securely stored on Google Drive, with access restricted to the researcher and the supervisor via a password-protected system. Lastly, the researcher acknowledged all sources utilized in the research, employing the Turnitin program to assess the similarity index.

3   Results

This section presents a comprehensive analysis and key findings about the experiences of Sub-Saharan African graduates who continued to live in the US upon completion of their studies. Both the quantitative and the qualitative data reveal a range of positive outcomes, including professional and personal growth, while also highlighting challenges such as cultural adjustment, perceived discrimination, and loneliness.

3.1   Respondents' Age, Gender, Race, Marital Status, and Home Country

Table 1 shows the demographics and general characteristics of the 224 respondents. The largest group, 45.5 % (36 Nigerians, 39 Kenyans and 27 South Africans) were aged 30-35 years. 25.9 % of the respondents consisting of 23 Nigerians, 20 Kenyans and 15 South Africans were aged 36-41 years, 8.9 % including 8 Nigerians, 7 Kenyans and 5 South Africans were aged 42-47 years, 1.8 % (3 Nigerians, 1 Kenyan) were

Table 1: Respondents' age, gender, race, marital status, and home country.

Respondent's characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18-23	1	0.4%
24-29	39	17.4%
30-35	102	45.5%
36-41	58	25.9%
42-47	20	8.9%
Above 47	4	1.8%
Gender		
Male	106	47.3%
Female	112	50.0%
Prefer not to say	6	2.7%
Race		
Black	206	92.0%
White	14	6.2%
Coloured	3	1.3%
Indian	1	0.4%
Marital status		
Single	128	57.1%
Married	81	36.2%
Divorced	15	6.7%
Separated	0	0%
Cohabiting	0	0%
Other	0	0%
Home country		
Nigeria	86	38.4%
Kenya	79	35.3%
South Africa	59	26.3%

aged above 47 years, and one South African respondent (0.4 % was in the 18-23 years age bracket. Half of the respondents comprising of 38 Nigerians, 46 Kenyans and 28 South Africans were female; 47.3 % (46 Nigerians, 30 Kenyans and 30 South Africans) were male, and 2.7 % of the participants (2 Nigerians, 3 Kenyans and 1 South African) did not reveal their gender.

Most of the respondents, 92.0 %, were of the black race including 85 Nigerians, 78 Kenyans and 43 South Africans. 6.2 % (1 Nigerian and 13 South Africans) were white, 1.3 % (3 South Africans) were coloured, and 0.4 % (1 Kenyan) Indian. The table also shows that 57.1 % of the participants were single. These included 46 Nigerians, 46 Kenyans and 36 South Africans. 36.2 % (35 Nigerians, 26 Kenyans, 20 South Africans) were married and 6.7 % (5 Nigerians, 7 Kenyans, 3 South Africans) were divorced. In every case, the home country indicated in Table 1 was also their nationality as indicated on their passport.

3.2   Respondents' Educational Degrees

Table 2 shows the respondents' educational degrees. Most of the respondents, 63.4 % (67 Nigerians, 57 Kenyans and 18 South Africans) had earned a bachelor's degree only from their home country, 20.0 % (18 Nigerians, 22 Kenyans and 5 South Africans) had earned a bachelor's and master's degree, 13.4 % (30

Table 2: Respondent's qualifications earned in home country and abroad (U.S).

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Qualifications earned from home country		
Bachelors	142	63.4%
Honors	0	0%
Masters	0	0%
Doctorate	0	0%
Bachelors and Honors	30	13.4%
Bachelors and Masters	45	20.0%
Bachelors, Honors and Masters	7	3.1%
Bachelors, Honors, Masters, and Doctorate	0	0%
Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate	0	0%
Qualifications earned from US/Abroad		
Bachelors	0	0%
Honors	0	0%
Masters	143	63.8%
Doctorate	35	15.6%
Bachelors and Masters	4	1.8%
Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate	3	1.3%
Masters and Doctorate	39	17.4%

South Africans, 0 Nigerians, and 0 Kenyans) had earned a bachelors and honours qualifications, while 3.1 % (6 South Africans, 1 Nigerian and 0 Kenyan) had earned a bachelor's, honours and master's degree from their home country. The findings also show that 63.8 % (47 Nigerians, 50 Kenyans and 46 South Africans) earned a master's degree only from USA/abroad, 17.4 % comprising of 23 Nigerians, 11 Kenyans and 5 South Africans earned a master's and doctorate from USA, 15.6 % (12 Nigerians, 15 Kenyans, and 8 South Africans) earned a doctorate only from USA/abroad, 1.8 % (2 Nigerians, 2 Kenyans) earned bachelor's and master's from USA/abroad, and 1.3 % (2 Nigerians, 1 Kenyan) earned bachelor's, master's and doctorate from USA/abroad.

Examining the quantitative data, the age distribution of the respondents follows the general pattern of migration. Studies conducted in the field of migration point to the fact that most of those who migrate in search of economic opportunities are young. It is worth mentioning that there are many reasons to believe that when young people are confronted with challenges of unemployment, poverty and insecurity in their home country, the only remaining option for them is migration.

Analysing graduate migration and gender dynamics, it was interesting to find out that the number of females who decided to remain in the US was higher than that of males. This may show a new trend and a change in the nature of migration. Traditionally males were believed to be the more migratory sex because they were considered as the breadwinners of the family and those left behind. Furthermore, the findings of this study point to the fact that Nigeria is a big contributor to non-returning graduates. This can be explained by a number of factors. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with a young age structure. In addition, Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of people living in extreme poverty in the world and high youth unemployment (Yeboua et al., 2024:7). South Africa seems to have a low rate of non-returning graduates. While economic opportunities for young people are scant, one possible reason for their return could be other commitments such as family or cultural connections that make coming back more appealing. The figures in Table 2 clearly indicate that participants have benefited from studying

abroad, with improved job opportunities in their country of origin. However, while higher qualification such as a master's degree is key, it is also important to remember that unemployment among graduates with master's degrees and/or doctorate is also growing in African countries. This may deter graduates from returning to their home country.

3.3   Respondents by Area of Specialisation

Table 3: Respondents by area of specialisation.

Area	Frequency	Percentage
Science	41	18.3%
Technology and Engineering (SET)	49	21.9%
Business and Economics	33	14.7%
Health and Medical Sciences	36	16.1%
Social Sciences and Humanities	65	29.0%

The findings in Table 3 demonstrate that 29.0 % consisting of 27 Nigerians, 25 Kenyans and 13 South Africans of the participants have specialized in social sciences and humanities, 21.9 % (21 Nigerians, 16 Kenyans and 12 South Africans) in technology and engineering (SET), 18.3 % (16 Nigerians, 13 Kenyans and 12 South Africans) in science, 16.1 % (13 Nigerians, 10 Kenyans and 13 South Africans) in health and medical sciences and 14.7 % (9 Nigerians, 15 Kenyans and 9 South Africans) in business and economics.

Examining the area of specialization of the respondents, the majority have qualifications in a specialized area with prospects of securing better job opportunity abroad. For instance, qualifications in fields such as health, technology, business, and economics (but not social sciences and humanities) can secure job opportunities in a developed country like the US.

3.4   Respondents' Experiences After Deciding to Remain Abroad

Table 4: Respondent's experiences after deciding to remain abroad upon completion of studies.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I get jobs related to my academic qualifications	119 (53.1%)	7 (3.1%)	20 (8.9%)	13 (5.8%)	65 (29.0%)
I feel lonely in host country	44 (19.6%)	20 (8.9%)	53 (23.7%)	5 (2.2%)	102 (45.5%)
I get better opportunities compared to my home country	184 (82.1%)	20 (8.9%)	9 (4.0%)	3 (1.3%)	8 (3.6%)
Easy access of information in host country	183 (81.7%)	14 (6.2%)	9 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (8.0%)
I have a lot of stress in host country compared to when I am in my country	65 (29.0%)	37 (16.5%)	72 (32.1%)	7 (3.1%)	43 (19.2%)
I feel happier in my host country	74 (33.0%)	41 (18.3%)	89 (39.7%)	4 (1.8%)	16 (7.1%)

According to the findings, 56.2 % (50 Nigerians, 37 Kenyans and 39 South Africans) of respondents agreed that they get jobs related to their academic qualifications, while 34.8 % (28 Nigerians, 34 Kenyans and 16 South Africans) disagreed. Additionally, 91.0 % of participants (75 Nigerians, 75 Kenyans and 54 South Africans) felt they had better opportunities compared to their home country, with only 4.9 % (8 Nigerians, 1 Kenyan and 2 South Africans) disagreeing. Regarding loneliness, 50.9 % (17 Nigerians, 20 Kenyans and 7 Nigerians) agreed that they feel lonely in the host country, while 47.7 % (31 Nigerians, 34

Kenyans and 37 South Africans) strongly disagreed. Further, the findings show that 32.1 % (35 Nigerians, 19 Kenyans and 18 South Africans) were neutral, 45.5 % (41 Nigerians, 46 Kenyans and 15 South Africans) agreed and 19.3 % (Nigerians, 13 Kenyans and 22 South Africans) disagreed that they have a much stress in the host country. Therefore, these results indicate that a significant number of respondents perceive the host country to be stressful while those who were neutral perhaps attribute stress to personal factors rather than being a characteristic of the host country. Also evident is that 51.3 % (43 Nigerians, 38 Kenyans and 34 South Africans) agreed and 8.9 % (8 Nigerians, 9 Kenyans and 3 South Africans) disagreed that they feel happier in their host country.

Examining participants' lived experience after deciding to stay in the US, it was evident that most of them had a good experience, and their expectations seemed to have been met. However, there were some who were not satisfied. The statements read:

> **Respondent 17:** *"I was offered a job after completing my studies and that was what I prayed for while studying for my degree. I didn't want to go home yet but also did not want to have any trouble with my visa. When they offered me a job, I was so grateful because it meant financial security and collaborating with many researchers in my field which is very important in academia"* — Male, Nigeria

> **Respondent 6:** *"It feels great to have a job that affords me the life I've always wanted. There are so many opportunities in the US if you go to the right places and seek them. Just like my home country, America has its own challenges, but I would rather be here for now and make more money while I still can than to be at home wondering if next month's expenses will be covered by my monthly salary."* — Male South Africa

> **Respondent 7:** *"Despite being financially stable, I love the fact that I have the freedom to be and live authentically without hiding who I am. I love socializing with like-minded people who create a safe space and embrace me"* — Female, Kenya

> **Respondent 14:** *"I miss home. Even though I have relatives to visit here, I miss my family, my mom, and siblings. I cry sometimes when I am alone because I know I can't board a plane and see them whenever I want. Life here can be lonely but most of us are here to improve our lives and that of our families".* — Female, Kenya

> **Respondent 6:** *"I have never lived in metropolis cities; I am a rural boy. After completing my studies, I got a job in a big city, and everything here is fast paced, and I am not used to this lifestyle. I prefer a quiet place and where I reside is a complete opposite, it's overwhelming me."* — Male, South Africa

> **Respondent 12:** *"Most of us know that America is diversified, multicultural and exceptional but being an African migrant living in America can be hard because they reduce you to the colour of your skin. It's a harsh reality but we are used to it. When you are Nigerian, it is even worse because everywhere we go in the world, they discriminate us based on our nationality, but we have to stay strong and continue to work hard because we are resilient"* — Male, Nigeria

> **Respondent 13:** *"I have been trying to get my husband to America for almost a year and 4 months, but the USCIS has been giving me the run around and COVID-19 slowed down the process. It was such a draining period for me because we have been far away from each other for a while but fortunately, he will be joining me soon."* — Female, South Africa

4   Discussion of the findings

Based on the quantitative data presented in Tables 1 to 4 and the qualitative results, a significant majority of respondents reported improved opportunities following their decision to remain in the United States.

The quantitative data includes statements such as, "I obtain jobs related to my academic qualifications", "I experience better opportunities compared to my home country", "I have easy access to information in the host country", "I encounter greater stress in the host country relative to my home country", and "I feel happier in my host country." These statements received substantial agreement or strong agreement from the respondents, indicating mainly positive experiences in the host country. Additionally, qualitative data analysis confirmed that respondents frequently emphasized better opportunities as their most notable experience, followed by higher salary than in their home countries,. One respondent also noted enhanced social life in the host country. Thus, it can be concluded that while it is possible that aspects like social life may be significant, professional opportunities and financial gains are prioritized.

In contrast, both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that respondents also faced negative experiences after opting to remain in the host country. Issues such as racism, loneliness, depression, challenges in cultural adaptation, and immigration-related concerns were reported by participants. The findings indicate a dichotomy in the experiences of migrants. Although many reported positive outcomes post-migration, including improved opportunities and salary, some respondents indicated that their employment did not align with their educational qualifications, leading to skill devaluation.

This observation corroborates prior observations by Siar (2013), who notes that even when the skills and education of highly skilled migrants are acknowledged, it is common for them to experience "deskilling" or to occupy positions significantly below their qualifications within the domestic labour market. Bauder (2003) asserts that "from a human rights perspective, deskilling constitutes a form of brain abuse." Moreover, deskilling not only incurs economic losses for migrants but also results in psychological and health issues, as migrants are not able to fully leverage their human capital (Siar, 2013). In terms of positive experiences, some participants noted a heightened sense of happiness compared to their circumstances in their home countries. This may be attributed to the possibility that some participants experienced unemployment prior to migration, leading to financial challenges and associated stress or unhappiness. In some cases, additional factors such as low wages and discrimination based on sexual orientation in the home country may have contributed to their struggles, thereby making life abroad seem more manageable.

On the negative side, respondents identified loneliness, stress, and difficulties in adapting to the host culture, with racism emerging as a particularly pronounced negative experience. This adds to much other research conducted in the United States, which examined the experiences of racism among Black Africans. It aligns with the findings of Boafo-Arthur (2014), who reviewed literature concerning the experiences of Black African immigrant students (BAIS) in U.S. higher education, identifying racial prejudice and discrimination as pivotal issues impacting their adjustment. The literature review indicates that Africans faced prejudice and discrimination based on their skin colour, culture, accent, and prevailing stereotypes related to their countries of origin, as reported by both local and other international students (including Black local students) (Zewolde, 2021: 14). However, Lee (2006) argues that this discriminatory experience be labelled as neo-racism, or "new racism" based on factors such as cultural influence, economic power or global status. Thus, this concept posits that discrimination is associated with cultural and economic hierarchies rather than solely with racial categories.

Furthermore, Berry (2017, cited in Albert, 2021) highlights that establishing new social ties in the host country is a fundamental task for immigrants during their socio-cultural and psychological adaptation process. Failure to forge connections within the host society can lead to social isolation and loneliness (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014). Gitonga and Muthoni (2024) argues that loneliness can be exacerbated by factors such as rejection, discrimination, isolation, stereotyping, and micro-aggressions encountered within new communities.

5   Limitations and future work

The study used snowball sampling to recruit relevant participants. This could possibly introduce bias, as the study relies on referrals from individuals who may know each other, resulting in other members of the population not having an equal chance of being selected. While the study offers significant insights into post-graduation experiences of Sub-Saharan African graduates in the U.S., the use of snowball sampling

limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the findings may not be applicable to all Sub-Saharan Africans specifically South Africans, Kenyans and Nigerians due to differences in backgrounds, visa statuses, resources, and support systems. Therefore, future research should utilize larger, more randomized samples. Although existing research on migration offers significant insights into the motivations driving Sub-Saharan graduates' decisions to migrate and pursue education abroad, as well as their lived experiences, there remains a substantial gap in the understanding of the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ after opting to remain in the United States post-graduation.

6   Conclusions and recommendations

The experiences of Sub-Saharan African graduates who choose to remain in the U.S. post-graduation highlight a blend of opportunities and challenges. While many participants report major professional gains such as employment that aligns with what they have studied, and better financial opportunities, these achievements are often accompanied by personal and societal challenges. These challenges include loneliness, stress, difficulty adapting to the American culture, and encounters with racism. These results reveal the contrasting realities of their migration experience. They face systematic challenges in the host country but at the same time enjoy economic stability and personal gains that are unavailable in their home country.

Migrants mostly lack support and tend to struggle with their new social, economic and cultural surroundings. However, policies and government interventions of the host country sometimes overlook migrants' social integration. This paper advocates for comprehensive support services that address the different needs of immigrants transitioning from student to resident status in the U.S. These services may include psychosocial support that addresses stress caused by cultural adjustment, navigating the job market, and establishing social connections. Offering these services can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and stress related to adapting to a different culture. In addition, career counselling and community engagement programs may assist in creating a more inclusive environment that values the well-being of immigrants.

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